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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000247

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTY AND ACTIVISTS PUT PRESSURE ON  
THAI GOVERNMENT

REF: 08 BANGKOK 3778 (ANUPONG ON GOVERNMENT)

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason: 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) Pro-Thaksin legislators and activists have criticized Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his administration on issues ranging from substantive to petty. Abhisit's critics have focused substantial attention on his appointment of figures linked to the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to cabinet and sub-cabinet positions. "Redshirt" anti-government protesters have threatened to hold demonstrations during the late February ASEAN Summit, causing the government to move the Summit to the town of Hua Hin, three hours' drive from Bangkok. Government opponents have scheduled a large demonstration in Bangkok on January 31, threatening to impede access to the Government House compound, as PAD had done in the past.

12. (C) Comment: Although Abhisit is not enjoying a political honeymoon, his opposition has not yet shown the capability to push him from office. It is unclear whether former PM Thaksin, or anyone else, will provide the opposition with sufficient funds and leadership to bring down the current government. For the moment, however, the opposition Puea Thai Party appears determined to exploit the elements of the 2007 Constitution that were designed to constrain the executive branch and prevent any future government from dominating the political realm to the extent Thaksin had. It is unclear, however, whether these complaints will prove to be anything more than a nuisance for the government, particularly if the Constitutional Court is unsympathetic to Puea Thai. As the formal parliamentary opposition, Puea Thai currently appears rudderless and uninspired; it may effectively cede the leading opposition role to the informal civil society "red shirt" movement in a way roughly analogous to the PAD's seeming eclipse of the Democrats in 2008.

13. (C) Comment, continued: Given that the pro-Thaksin camp has at times used violence against opponents, the criticisms directed at the government appear to represent less than an all-out effort by Thaksin's allies. The current efforts of the opposition could reflect a decline in Thaksin's ability to influence events in Thailand, and indeed, one key Thaksin

lieutenant said privately January 29 that "Thaksin is finished." Redshirt leaders vow that their movement is no longer dependent on Thaksin but represents deeper forces at work in Thailand; we do not rule out the possibility of a dramatic effort by the pro-Thaksin camp to regain momentum.  
End Summary and Comment.

WHO ARE THE "REDSHIRTS"?  
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¶4. (SBU) After the Army deposed Prime Minister Thaksin in 2006, activists created various organizations critical of the coup d'etat; eventually, some of these pro-Thaksin organizations merged into the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD). Political activists involved in this group also were associated with the People's Television (PTV) media outlet, and, later, with the "Truth Today" television program. Using one or another of these labels, activists organized rallies to show support for Thaksin and to denounce the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Other groups that formed, such as the "Udorn Lovers" (in Udorn Thani province, where voters have been pro-Thaksin) or "Love Chiang Mai 51" (in Thaksin's home city of Chiang Mai) undertook similar activities but have seemed more willing to resort to violence against local PAD supporters.

¶5. (C) Adopting red as its color (red represents the nation on Thailand's red, white, and blue flag), the pro-Thaksin movement -- which can be understood as a loose association of various organizations and networks -- became known informally as "redshirts." Bangkok-based UDD leaders have consistently claimed to us that the Udorn and Chiang Mai redshirts are not

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formally a part of the UDD movement. We believe the pro-Thaksin demonstrations result from the organizing efforts of certain leading individuals, who tap personal networks and likely receive financial support from Thaksin or his close associates. We believe Thaksin remains popular in some areas, particularly rural areas of the North and Northeast, but his popularity has likely declined since the 2007 election. Large pro-Thaksin rallies appear unlikely to be sustained by sentiment alone, but instead may rely on funding to motivate participants.

CRITICAL OF ABHISIT FROM DAY ONE  
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¶6. (SBU) Legislators from the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai Party and "redshirt" activists have been critical of Abhisit from the moment that he became Prime Minister, depriving him of any political honeymoon. After receiving the royal command that appointed him as Prime Minister in late December, Abhisit sent a gracious text message to mobile phone users throughout Thailand; a Puea Thai MP quickly filed a complaint with the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC), claiming that the text message service, seemingly provided gratis to the government, was tantamount to an illegal contribution. (Note: Separately, a consumer advocate with no known partisan agenda complained that government attempts to analyze patterns of responses to the text message could represent an invasion of privacy, though others countered that commercial spam SMSes fell into the same category. End Note) Some Puea Thai figures also made seemingly frivolous charges that some of the MPs who supported Abhisit in the House election had voted illegitimately.

¶7. (SBU) A Puea Thai MP lodged a criminal complaint against Interior Minister Chaovarat Charnvirakul in late December, after Chaovarat instructed provincial governors to monitor the redshirt movement. The complaint alleged that Chaovarat had no basis to exercise state authority, because PM Abhisit had not yet delivered his formal policy statement to the parliament. When, a few days later, redshirt protesters

blocked the parliament in anticipation of Abhisit's appearance to deliver that policy statement, House Speaker Chai Chidchob, who is sympathetic to the new administration, shifted the venue to the MFA. Puea Thai MPs then complained the Speaker had acted improperly; they also criticized Abhisit's decision to continue certain populist policies, saying that showed a lack of originality and vision. Most recently, Puea Thai figures have threatened to impeach certain cabinet members who voted in the House for a budgetary measure, claiming a violation of Article 177 of the Constitution, which prohibits cabinet members from voting on matters in which they have interests.

#### NON-ALIGNED SENATOR FILES COMPLAINTS

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18. (SBU) Not all the criticism of the administration has come from partisan figures, however. One "selected" Senator (Senators either run for election, ostensibly as non-partisan figures, or receive a seat based on a selection committee decision), Ruangkrai Leekitwatana, has complained to the NCCC about the actions of Deputy Interior Minister Boonjong Wongtrairat, a "Friends of Newin" faction member now part of Phumjai Thai, who distributed government funds to villagers in the form of cash stapled to his business card. Of all the criticisms leveled at Abhisit and his administration, the Boonjong case currently appears the most serious, with the scandal prompting Abhisit to say publicly that he may consider a cabinet reshuffle.

19. (C) Ruangkrai also had petitioned for a judicial review of Abhisit's election, claiming it proceeded unconstitutionally, because his party cooperated with some politicians who had been disenfranchised by a Constitutional Court ruling (Note: This strikes us as a frivolous complaint, unlikely to gain traction. End note). Ruangkrai appears to be not working deliberately on Thaksin's behalf but, rather, an independent activist. It was Ruangkrai in 2008 who initiated the complaint to the Election Commission about (pro-Thaksin) Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej's participation in a cooking

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show, ultimately leading to the Constitutional Court ejecting Samak from office.

#### FOCUS ON PAD-LINKED OFFICIALS, PARTICULARLY FM KASIT

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110. (C) Some of the opposition's harshest criticisms have concerned the Abhisit administration's appointment of certain figures linked to the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the group that occupied Bangkok's airports in late 2008. Most of the opposition's ire has been directed at Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, who was a frequent speaker at PAD rallies and who openly supported the group's cause. Thaksin allies have also criticized the prospective appointments of two PAD-associated figures, Prapan Khoonmee and Pichet Pattanachot, as Advisor to the Minister for Science and Technology and Advisor to the Minister for Public Health, respectively. Despite this criticism, the Abhisit administration proceeded to formalize these appointments.

#### FOCUS ON ASEAN SUMMIT

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111. (SBU) Redshirt activists have said they will organize protests against the government during the upcoming (February 27 - March 1) ASEAN Summit. While they justify this by citing their objection to PAD-linked FM Kasit, who has a leading role in organizing the Summit, they also likely realize that their protests may garner more regional attention if they come at a time when regional heads of government are visiting Thailand. A flier distributed by pro-Thaksin activists promised to, among other steps, hold protests at ASEAN member states' Embassies; rally peacefully at Bangkok's international airport on the arrival dates of

ASEAN leaders; and hold a "major rally" at the time of the Summit. Seemingly concerned about the prospect of disruptive protests, the Abhisit administration has shifted the Summit venue from Bangkok to Hua Hin, a town three hours' drive away from the capital, where King Bhumibol has spent much of his time in recent years.

#### GOING BEYOND PEACEFUL DISCOURSE

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¶12. (C) In private discussions with us, Thaksin-allied figures have claimed they do not intend to undercut their legitimacy by using violence. There are recent precedents for redshirt actions that go beyond peaceful protests, however:

- Redshirts used rocks to smash at least one Democrat MP's car as MPs left the parliament after electing Abhisit as Prime Minister on December 15.
- Redshirts on January 6 threw eggs at Democrat former PM Chuan Leekpai when he traveled to the northern province of Lampang in advance of recent by-elections.
- A hostile mob of redshirts trapped Deputy Finance Minister Pradit Phataraprasit in a temple when he visited Chiang Mai in late January, forcing him to flee through a secondary exit.
- Abhisit claimed publicly that, after his election, he received anonymous death threats.

¶13. (C) Judging by numerous detonations of explosive devices targeting PAD protest sites in November-December prior to Abhisit's election, it appears to us that the pro-Thaksin camp has a capacity for a greater level of violence. In late December, Army Commander Anupong Paojinda expressed concern to the Ambassador that redshirts would carry out bombings during New Year celebrations (reftel); in the end, the holiday passed peacefully, apart from a nightclub fire which killed more than 60 and the usual slew of road deaths blamed on drunk driving.

#### DEMONSTRATION PLANNED ON JANUARY 31

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¶14. (SBU) Redshirt leaders have planned a major demonstration

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in Bangkok on January 31, starting at 4:00 p.m. UDD leader Vira Musikapong told us January 30 the three main demands would be Kasit's dismissal, prosecution of PAD figures associated with the late 2008 airport closures, and restoration of the 1997 Constitution. Vira claimed they expected 30,000 to join the rally. If sufficient numbers attended, they would march on Government House, starting at 9:00 p.m. The plan was to announce UDD's demands, give the government 15 days to comply, and disperse "after five minutes." The rally would resume 15 days later in mid-February, in advance of the ASEAN summit. Were Abhisit to fail to comply, which Vira acknowledged was likely, the UDD would consider a "continuous" protest similar to PAD efforts from August-December 2008. It would not, however, seek to "occupy" the Government House compound, only maintain a cordon to deny Abhisit entry.

¶15. (SBU) The government has not publicly discussed its plans (if any) to contain the January 31 demonstration, but one of the redshirt organizers has claimed hundreds of military personnel will covertly infiltrate the crowd. Additionally, Minister Attached to the Prime Minister's Office Satit Wongnongtaey has publicly threatened to close five community radio stations, including one in Bangkok, for inciting unrest.

#### THAKSIN NO LONGER KEY TO REDSHIRT STRATEGY?

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¶16. (C) Chaturon Chaiseng, one of the most talented Thaksin lieutenants among the original banned 111 Thai Rak Thai executives, told diplomats privately January 29 that he considered "Thaksin is finished politically." UDD leader Vira, another of the banned 111, was evasive January 30 when asked the extent to which Thaksin continued to fund UDD efforts, including the recently launched red satellite "D-TV." The redshirt movement would continue regardless of Thaksin's status or fate, Vira vowed, echoing what fellow UDD leader Jakrapob Penkair had told us in August 2008. Vira dismissed parliamentary opposition Puea Thai as incompetent, stated that UDD leaders did not coordinate with Puea Thai politicians, and claimed that redshirt actions outside the framework of formal politics were now more important to the red cause than what Puea Thai did.

¶17. (C) Ending on a more ominous note, Vira stated that those -- specifically mentioning the military, members of the monarchy, and the Democrat Party -- who think that the redshirt movement was not genuine but a creation of Thaksin misunderstood the reality of contemporary Thailand and sentiments of the Thai people. They were making a colossal mistake which could come back to haunt them, and ultimately lead to the "Nepal scenario" (i.e., the end of the monarchy).  
JOHN